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71.2009.085-05754

Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

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The Evaluation of Greatness:
A Study of Lincoln and Emerson.

A paper read before the
Lincoln Group of Chicago

by

Ralph G. Newman

18 May 1939

CHARACTER

The sun set, but set not his hope:
Stars rose; his faith was earlier up:
Fixed on the enormous galaxy,
Deeper and older seemed his eye;
And matched his sufferance sublime
The taciturnity of time.
He spoke, and words more soft than rain
Brought the Age of Gold again:
His action won such reverence sweet
As hid all measure of the feat.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON



The Evaluation of Greatness -

A Study of Lincoln and Emerson.

Contemporary history interests the keen observer. We read the newspapers and the periodicals and listen to the radio speeches of various commentators and try to gain a detached and impartial view of present day happenings, and, since the nation's history is written in the lives of her great men, we closely observe the statesmen of our time and read their writings and listen to their speeches and attempt to measure the stature of our national leaders. But, is it possible to properly evaluate the men of our time? Is it possible to put aside our prejudices and our partisan feelings and the concern we feel for our own affairs, to rightly judge the character and purposes and sincerity of any given public personage and say -

"this man is great ... this man will live in history."

The student of the life of Lincoln often has periods of deep thought when he puts aside his books and pamphlets and tries to visualize himself observing the trend of events and see the Lincoln that lived and breathed, not through written records, but personally. After reading accounts in the press of the First Inaugural, without knowledge of the four years to come, would we have seen anything wonderful in the new President? Would we have stood on the Battlefield of Gettysburg on the chilly nineteenth of November in 1863 and listened to the President's dedicatory speech and pronounced it a classic - or would we have said to our friends afterward, "Lincoln also made a few remarks." At the Proclamation of Emancipation, would we have stormed because the President waited too long, or criticized him for doing it too soon, or would we

have said, "The President has wisdom and foresight, he waited until precisely the right moment; Lincoln is a great man!"

Of course we have the writings of Lincoln's associates, his neighbors, his friends. They all record painstakingly and, on the average, honestly, their impressions of Lincoln. But, did they see his real greatness? Did they see above and beyond, to the time when their president would be looked upon as a world-hero? Was there in all America a contemporary of Lincoln who was capable of doing this? Let us travel back in our minds, to the last century and "The Wisest American" of Lincoln's time - "The Sage of Concord" and put him upon the witness stand. Let us see how the most brilliant mind of the period, Ralph Waldo Emerson, evaluated the greatness of Lincoln.

In his famous essay on "Greatness", Emerson says

"... a great style of hero draws equally all classes, all the extremes of society, till we say the very dogs believe in him ..."✓

However, Emerson was not dealing in abstractions in making this statement. He was eulogizing a particular person, and, after that person was already accepted as great. He was only adding his voice to that almost universal chorus that was proclaiming Lincoln's greatness. It is possible, through Emerson's journals and his other writings to show that this point was reached by a hesitant process. To trace the development of Emerson's regard for Lincoln is to trace the welding of a most important link in the national integrity; it is to trace the acceptance of the pioneer westerner into the national picture by

✓ from "Greatness", Vol. VIII, Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson.
pp. 299-320. 1903-4.

the cultured East; it is to trace that growing consciousness that a man of the border states could become great because of his lack of opportunities and not in spite of this lack.

Lincoln respected and admired Mr. Emerson's writings. William H. Herndon in a letter² gives a list of the books which he, Herndon, owned and which as he says "Lincoln had access to and sometimes peeped into, ..." - it is interesting to note that this list starts with Emerson, indicating the high regard which Herndon, and possibly Lincoln held Emerson. In a speech given by Mr. Lincoln when he was twenty-eight years old, he defined greatness and really described Emerson -

"... Towering genius disdains a beaten path. It seeks regions hitherto unexplored. It sees no distinction in adding story to story upon the monuments of fame erected to the memory of others ... "³

Yet in 1837 when this speech was made the Lincoln-Herndon partnership had not yet been formed and Emerson's first book "Nature" had been issued on a few months before. Lincoln had probably never heard of Emerson. It was not until 1853 that Lincoln was to hear Emerson lecture.⁴ On the tenth and eleventh of January in that year, Emerson lectured in the Hall of the House of Representatives in Springfield on the "Anglo-Saxon" and "Power". Orville Hickman Browning in his diary refers to the occasion -⁵

² December 29, 1885. Hertz: The Hidden Lincoln. N.Y., 1938.

³ Speech before Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield. Nicolay & Hay: Works. Vol. I. 1905.

⁴ Thomas: Lincoln 1847-1853. Springfield (1936).

⁵ Browning: Diary, Volume I - 1850-1864. Springfield, 1925.

"... At night I attended in the Hall of the House, and heard a lecture from Ralph Waldo Emerson ... His language was chaste, strong and vigorous - much of his thought just - his voice good - his delivery clear, distinct and deliberate ... whilst I cannot approve all his philosophy, I still listen with delight to hearing his discourses. They contain much that is good and worth hearing ..."

Before we proceed with our examination of Mr. Emerson let us take a swift glance at the respective backgrounds of Lincoln and Emerson. Ralph Waldo Emerson was born near Boston Common, seven years before a son was born to Tom and Nancy Lincoln in a cabin on the Big South Fork of Nolin's Creek in Hardin County, Kentucky. Tragedy stalked into the lives of both of these children when they were eight years old. The Reverend William Emerson, Ralph's father, died of tuberculosis in 1810. In 1817 when Abe Lincoln was eight, the dreaded "milk-sick" took Nancy Hanks Lincoln from her family and their new home on Little Pigeon Creek, Indiana. While Emerson at the age of fourteen was already a student at Harvard, little Abe had an ax put into his hands and helped his father cut down trees and notch logs. When Emerson was nineteen he was teaching a class of young ladies languages, geography, arithmetic and chemistry. At nineteen young Lincoln was making his trip down the Mississippi on a flat-boat. In 1829 the year the Lincolns moved from Indiana to Coles County, Illinois, young Reverend Ralph Waldo Emerson married Ellen Louisa Tucker. In 1832 both of these young men "found themselves." Emerson left the ministry and sailed for Europe where he was to meet Carlyle and embark on his long and useful life - " ... a life as transparent as glass, as clear as spring water; to become our only Olympian in literature".⁶

⁶ Russell: Emerson, The Wigest American. N.Y., 1927.

In 1832 Abraham Lincoln announced that he was going to run for the office of member of the legislature of the state of Illinois, to represent the people of Sangamon County. Herndon in speaking of these two men said:✓

"Lincoln and Emerson differed widely. Emerson had the genius of the spiritual and ideal; Lincoln had the genius of the real and practical. Emerson lived high among the stars ; Lincoln lived low among men. Emerson dreamed; Lincoln acted. Emerson was institutional; Lincoln reflective. Both were liberals in religion and were great men."

Emerson gives no indication that he knew anything of Lincoln before the nomination. In the latter part of 1861 there is an entry in the Journals^{8/} that indicates his growing interest in the affairs of the country. Emerson writes:

"President Lincoln ... speaks his own thought in his own style, all thanks and honor to the Head of the State."

When Abraham Lincoln became the Republican Candidate for the Presidency seventy-nine years ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson had already been converted to the cause of Abolition. In 1857 John Brown came to Concord and in a speech definitely won Emerson over. At the time he described Brown as a "new saint".^{9/} Ten years later when his essay on John Brown was published, Emerson had learned that while John Brown was an earnest man he was no saint, new or otherwise. Emerson's anti-slavery attitude caused the cancellation of a lecture in Philadelphia, and even his own Boston grew cold. In 1861 when Emerson spoke in the Tremont Temple, the crowd refused to hear him and raised such an uproar he left the hall.

^{7/} Hertz: The Hidden Lincoln. Letter, Feb. 18, 1886.

^{8/} Emerson: Journals, Edited by Edward Waldo Emerson, & Waldo Emerson Forbes. 1909-1914.

^{9/} Emerson: Miscellanies, Vol. XI, Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

After Sumter Emerson became pro-war. Phillips Russell one of Emerson's biographers comments:¹⁰ "In his enthusiasm he even abandoned his previously low opinion of the masses and said 'I will never speak lightly of a crowd'. He even exclaimed 'Sometimes gun-powder smells good'. He was not eager for the preservation of the Union, proposing that a cordon sanitaire be drawn about the slave-holding states. In this respect he differed from President Lincoln, and on that account misunderstood him."

Edward Emerson tells of an incident that occurred on his father's 59th birthday.¹¹ Edward and his father had spent the early part of the day around the barnyard and before returning to the house decided to put a calf into its stall. The calf resisted. The son and father tried to shove the animal into the barn without success. Emerson was not a man to be easily defeated and again attempted to complete ^{the} undertaking. The heifer resisted. Emerson paused - Plato, Newton, Buddha, Bacon, Plutarch - he had read their writings but none of them mentioned an effective method of pushing a recalcitrant calf into its stall. Just then a servant girl came by. With an amused glance she thrust a finger into the calf's mouth and the animal fooled by the maternal imitation at once followed her into the barn. Edward looked at his father and grinned. Emerson was already absorbed in thought and upon returning to the house recorded the incident in his journal and added the note "I Like people who can do things."¹² All his life Emerson admired men who could do things, yet when the really great man of his period came upon the scene Emerson almost failed to recognize him before it was too late.

¹⁰ Russell: Emerson, The Wisest American. N.Y., 1927

¹¹ Russell: ibid.

¹² Emerson: Journals, Edited by Edward Waldo Emerson. & Waldo E. Forbes

Emerson was invited by the Smithsonian Institution to deliver a lecture in Washington on the last day of January, 1862. Just after the outbreak of war in April of 1860 he had given a lecture, in a course in Boston on Life and Literature, which he had called "Civilization at a Pinch," the title suggesting the crisis which had suddenly come to pass. "In the course of the year the flocking of slaves to the Union camps, and the opening vista of a long and bitter struggle, with slavery now acknowledged as its root, had brought the question of Emancipation as a war-measure to the front. Mr. Emerson saw hope in this situation of affairs, and when he went to Washington with the chance of being heard by men in power there, he prepared himself to urge the measure, as well on grounds of policy as of right."³ His friend Moncure Daniel Conway commented on this lecture - ⁴

"The revolution against slavery was strong enough to carry our 'Sage of Concord' to Washington, where our rulers were hitching the Union to a flag star, especially Kentucky. Several cabinet ministers attended his lecture, but it was preaching to Merlin's bound in prisons of air by their own irreverible spell."

The Boston lecture was much expanded to meet with the need of the hour. There is no evidence that Mr. Lincoln heard it; it is probable that he did not; nor is it true that Mr. Emerson had a long and earnest conversation with him on the subject next day, both of which assertions have been made in print.⁵ Mr. Emerson made an unusual record of his stay in Washington. It is the only case in which he wrote in his journals so detailed a story of his experiences when away from home, except when in Europe.⁶ He tells of his introduction to Mr. Lincoln and a short chat with him, evidently there was little opportunity for serious conversation. The president's secretaries had in 1886, no memory of his

- ¹³ Emerson: Miscellanies, Vol. XI, Complete Works. Note by Edw. Emerson.
- ¹⁴ Conway: Autobiography, Memories & Experiences. Boston, 1904.
- ¹⁵ Emerson: Washington In Wartime. Atlantic Monthly, July, 1904.
- ¹⁶ Emerson: Ibid.

having attended the lecture, and the Washington papers do not mention his presence there.¹⁷ A Gentleman in Washington, who took the trouble to look up the question as to whether Mr. Lincoln or other high official heard it¹⁸ says Mr. Lincoln could hardly have attended the lecture then:

"He was very busy at the time, Stanton the new war secretary having just come in, and storming like a fury at the business of his department. The great ~~approximations~~^{operations} of the war for the time overshadowed all the other events ... It is worth remarking that in this Lecture clearly foreshadowed the policy of Emancipation some six or eight months in advance of Mr. Lincoln. He saw the logic of events leading up to crisis in our affairs to 'emancipation as a platform with compensation to the loyal owners.' The lecture was fully attended."

Very possibly it may be with regard to this address that we have the interesting account given of the effect of Mr. Emerson's speaking on a well-known English author. Dr. Garnett says:¹⁹

"A shrewd judge, Anthony Trollope, was particularly struck with the note of sincerity in Emerson when he heard him address a large meeting during the Civil War. Not only was the speaker terse, perspicuous, and practical to a degree amazing to Mr. Trollope's preconceived notions, but he commanded his hearer's respect by the frankness of his dealing with them. When shortly afterward Mr. Trollope heard another speaker, he discerned at once that oratory was an end with him, instead of, as with Emerson, a means. He was neither bold nor honest, as Emerson had been, and the people knew that while pretending to lead them he was led by them."

¹⁷ Emerson: Ibid.

¹⁸ Emerson: Miscellanies, op. cit.

¹⁹ Garnet: Life of Emerson. 1888.

A short time before this address was delivered Moncure Daniel Conway (a young Virginian who for conscience' sake had left his charge as a Methodist preacher and had abandoned his inheritance in slaves to become a Unitarian minister and an abolitionist) had read in Concord an admirable and eloquent lecture called "The Rejected Stone". This stone, slighted by the founders, although they knew it to be a source of danger, had now become "the head of the corner" and its continuance in the national structure threatened its stability. Mr. Emerson had been much struck with the soundness of Mr. Conway's arguments, based on his knowledge of Southern economics and character, and in this lecture made free use of them.²⁰ ✓

In Emerson's Journal for the four days he was in Washington, we read:²¹ ✓

"Saw Sumner who carried me to Mr. Chase, Mr. Bates, Mr. Stanton, Mr. Welles, Mr. ~~Ward~~, Lord Lyons and President Lincoln. The President impressed me more favorably than I had hoped. A frank, sincere, well-meaning man, with a lawyer's habit of mind, good, clear statement of his fact, correct enough, not vulgar as described; but with a sort of boyish cheerfulness, or that kind of sincerity and jolly good meaning that our class meetings on Commencement Days show, in telling our old stories over. When he has made his remark, he looks up at you with great satisfaction, and shows all his white teeth and laughs. He argued to Sumner the whole case of Gordon, the slave-trader, point by point, and added that he was not quite satisfied yet, and ^{meant} ~~next~~ to refresh his memory by looking again at the evidence. All this showed fidelity and

²⁰ Emerson: Miscellanies, op. cit.

²¹ Emerson: Journals, op. cit.; Atlantic Monthly, July, 1904.

conscientiousness very honorable to him. When I was introduced to him, he said, "Oh, Mr. Emerson, I once heard you say in a lecture, that a Kentuckian seems to say by his air and manner, 'Here am I: if you don't like me, the worse for you.' ."

A large gap separates the Lincoln of pre-Emancipation days from the man who was eulogized as a martyr in 1865. Many men who were dissatisfied in the rough hewn frontier lawyer who entered the White House were eventually to praise him as the greatest American. As Roy P. Basler, one of our foremost scholars in this phase of the Lincoln story points out²² - it was the men of letters, and especially the group of which Emerson was a member, who underestimated the man, who were impatient at his hesitancy in proclaiming Emancipation, and who finally praised and idealized Lincoln as the great American genius.

On the twenty-second of September in 1862, President Lincoln at last spoke the words so earnestly desired by the friends of freedom and the victims of slavery, abolishing slavery on the first day of the coming year in those states which should then be in rebellion against the United States.²³ At a meeting held in Boston in honor of this utterance Emerson spoke and this speech was printed in the Atlantic Monthly of November, 1862 under the title "The President's Proclamation". In this address we can see Emerson's growing appreciation of Lincoln's greatness²⁴:

"The extreme moderation with which the President advanced to his design, - the long avowed expectant policy, as if he chose to be strictly the executive of the best public sentiment of the country, waiting only till it should be unmistakably pronounced, - so fair

²² Basler: The Lincoln Legend, Boston, 1935.

²³ Nicolay & Hay: Works of Abraham Lincoln. Vol. VIII. 1905.

²⁴ Emerson: Miscellanies, op. cit.; Atlantic Monthly, Nov., 1862.

a mind that none ever listened so patiently to such varieties of opinion, - so reticent that his decision has taken all parties by surprise, whilst yet it is the just sequel of his prior acts, - the firm tone in which he announces it, without inflation or surplusage, - all these have bespoken such favor to the act, that, great as the popularity of the President has been, we are beginning to think that we have underestimated the capacity and virtue which the Divine Providence has made an instrument of benefit so vast. He has been permitted to do more for America than any other American man. He is well entitled to the most indulgent construction. Forget all that we thought shortcomings, every mistake, every delay. In the extreme embarrassments of his part, call these endurance, wisdom, magnanimity, illuminated, as they now are, by this dazzling success."

Yet the cultured Emerson could not reconcile Lincoln's crude, friendly, typically western habits with his (and the standard) idea of how a President should deport himself. In the Journal for November, 1863 we find mild reproof for Lincoln,²⁵

"We must accept the results of universal suffrage, and not try to make it appear that we can elect fine gentlemen. We shall have coarse men, with a fair chance of worth and manly ability, but not polite men to please the French and English. You cannot refine Mr. Lincoln's taste, extend his horizon, or clear his judgements; he will not walk dignifiedly through the traditional role of the President of America, but will pop out his head at each railway station and make a little speech, and get into an argument with Squire A and Judge B. He will write letters to Horace Greeley,

✓ Emerson: Journals. Edited by Edward W. Emerson and Waldo

and any editor or reporter or saucy party committee that writes to him, and cheapen himself. But this we must be ready for, and let the clown appear, and hug ourselves that we are well off, if we have got good nature, honest meaning, and fidelity to public interest, with bad manners - instead of an elegant rouse and malignant self-seeker."

But finally even the manners were accepted. Lincoln was teaching Emerson practical democracy. The last reference to Lincoln in the Journals, written only a few days before the fatal fourteenth of April, 1865 shows the growing appreciation of greatness.²⁶ ✓

"Why talk of President Lincoln's equality of manners to the elegant or titled man with whom Everett or others saw him? A sincerely upright and intelligent man as he was, placed in the chair, has no need to think of his manners or appearance. His work day by day educates him rapidly and to the best. He exerts the enormous power of this continent in every hour, in every conversation, in every act; - thinks and decides under this pressure, forced to see the vast and various bearings of the measures he adopts; he cannot falter, he cannot but carry a grace beyond his own, a dignity, by means of ~~XXXXX~~ what he drops, e.g. all his pretension and tricks."

In November of 1864 in a letter to his friend George Bradford, E Emerson comments on Lincoln's victory over McClellan in the election,²⁷ ✓

"I give you joy of the Election. Seldom in history was so much staked on a popular vote - I suppose never in history."

²⁶ Emerson: Ibid.

²⁷ Emerson: Miscellanies, op. cit. pp. 613.

On April nineteenth, 1865 the people of Concord gathered, as had been their custom for ninety years, but this time not to celebrate the anniversary of the glorious victory of the intrepid colonists of 1775. The people came together in the old meeting-house to mourn for their wise and good Chief Magistrate, murdered just as he had triumphantly finished the great work which fell to his lot. Mr. Emerson spoke: ²⁸✓

"We meet under the gloom of a calamity which darkens down over the minds of ^{good} men in all civil society, as the fearful tidings travel over sea, over land, from country to country, like the shadow of an uncalculated eclipse over the planet. Old as history is, and manifold as are its tragedies, I doubt if any death has caused so much pain to mankind as this has caused ... In this country, on Saturday, every one was struck dumb, and saw at first only deep below deep, as he meditated on the ghastly blow ... but that first despair was brief: the man was not so to be mourned. He was the most active and hopeful of men; and his work had not perished: but acclamations of praise for the task he had accomplished burst out into a song of triumph which even tears for his death cannot keep down. The President stood before us a man of the people. He was thoroughly American, had never crossed the sea, ~~had never crossed the sea~~, had never been spoiled by English insularity or French dissipation; ... no frivolous accomplishments, Kentuckian born, working on a farm, a flatboatman, a captain in the Black Hawk War, a country lawyer, a representative in the rural legislature of Illinois; on such modest foundations the broad structure of his fame was laid. How slowly, and yet by happily prepared steps, he came to his place.

²⁸✓ Emerson: Miscellaneous. op. cit. pp. 327-328.

A plain man of the people, an extraordinary fortune attended him. He offered no shining qualities at the first encounter; he did not offend by superiority. He had a face and manner which disarmed suspicion, which inspired confidence, which confirmed good will. He was a strong man without vices. He had a strong sense of duty, which it was very easy for him to obey. ..."

In closing let us return to Emerson's essay on "Greatness"²⁹ -
"... A great style of hero draws equally all classes, all the extremes of society, till we say the very dogs believe in him. We have had such examples in this country, in Daniel Webster and Henry Clay ... ; in England, Charles James Fox; in Scotland, Robert Burns; and in France, though it is less intelligible, Voltaire. Abraham Lincoln is perhaps the most remarkable example of this class we have seen, - a man who was at home and welcome with the humblest, and with a spirit and a practical vein in the times of terror that commanded the admiration of the wisest. His heart was as great as the world, but there was no room in it to hold the memory of a wrong."

* * * * *

Webster defines great as meaning:³⁰

"Much above the average in magnitude, intensity, importance ... eminent, distinguished."

In his final analysis of Lincoln Emerson uses these same terms.

²⁹ Emerson: "Greatness" Vol. VIII, Works. pp. 299-320.

³⁰ Webster: New International Dictionary, 2nd Edition. 1938.

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN, SPOKESMAN FOR AMERICA
Remarks by Ralph G. Newman
August 18, 1963

We pay tribute tonight, not to a man who lived a century ago and whose life span was 56 years, 2 months and 3 days, but to an individual who lives today in the 154th year of his humble birth in Kentucky. We Americans rightfully continually honor Abraham Lincoln as the man who has affected most profoundly the likes, thoughts, attitudes, and actions of modern Americans. Why does he continue to grow in our political philosophy, our cultural inheritance, our social and moral consciousness? Why has he remained, in the near century since April, 1865, as powerful an influence and reality as he was in life? Why is it that influence is growing, not fading?

Lincoln conceived of America as more than people, or homes, or wealth, or wheat, or corn, or steel, or factories. To him it embodied an idea. Common sacrifices for a new and better way of life were like "mystic chords of memory", he said, "stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every ^{living} heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land. . . ." America was a trustee for humanity. The United States was bound together by an idea. If the Union perished the idea would perish with it. Thus the issue of the Civil War to Lincoln was the preservation of the American Union, in order that America might go on to fulfill its mission as the exemplar of democracy to the world.

Abraham Lincoln, who rescued a whole race of men from slavery and saved the American experiment in Democracy for all time, has become in the near century since his death a kind of symbol of all the Good toward which humanity is striving; a living proof that man can attain that Good. Revered to the point of worship, both in this country and abroad, his name has come to mean many things; as if the very name itself spells out the truest meanings of honesty, compassion, humor, and wisdom. Yet, he

lives on for people as a man . . . a flesh and blood and bone human being whose greatness they can accept because they can accept his origin, his ways, his laughter. He is like a neighbor with whom to swap yarns over the back fence at sunset; he is easy-walking, easy talking. You don't have to play up to him and he won't play down to you. You know where you are with Lincoln. And he knows where he is with you.

And yet, there is that dedication in him, that urge of destiny running through him and the strength to answer the challenge, and you wonder. . . Is some of this same greatness in my neighbor, my son, myself? There may well be, for Lincoln was one of us. Lincoln was all of us. He was spokesman for all that went before him in the building of America and everything for which we have since fought to preserve.

There are enduring lessons in Lincoln's philosophy. The nations of the earth will always need his faith in the people, in their judgment, in their ability to govern themselves. And America has, to the farthest generation, the obligation to maintain and fulfill the destiny prepared by the founding fathers for what Lincoln termed in affection and respect the "family of man".



